

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

September 23, 2003

The Honorable David Walker
Comptroller General
U.S. General Accounting Office
Washington, DC

Dear Comptroller General Walker:


This year the Census Bureau has moved the release of the annual income and poverty estimates both in time and space. Traditionally, the announcement of these numbers is made at the National Press Club on a Tuesday or Thursday in late September. This year, the reports will be released on Friday in Suitland, Maryland. We write to ask that the GAO investigate the circumstances surrounding this change.

Normally, the delay of a report for a few days would not alarm anyone in Congress. It is often the case that the Administration misses its own deadlines. However, when the nation's premier statistical agency delays its report on poverty in a stagnant economy characterized by the loss of millions of jobs it looks suspicious, particularly when the administration has developed a habit of releasing bad news on Friday afternoon.¹ This action is uncomfortably reminiscent of attempts by President Nixon to influence statistical information coming out of both the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

We would like the GAO to investigate the decision process for delaying this report and moving the press briefing to Suitland. First, we would like to know if anyone at the Census Bureau informed the White House of the contents of this report. If so, was that notification or discussion prior to the decision to move and delay the report? Second, we would like the GAO to investigate who participated in this decision. Did the director authorize or guide this decision? What role did officials at the Department of Commerce play in formulating or approving this decision? Were there any conversations, meetings, phone calls, or discussions between officials at the Department of Commerce and the White House prior to this decision? If so, who participated in those conversations? Finally, we would like GAO to determine if any undue political pressure was brought to bear on the professional staff at the Census Bureau. If so, who participated in those actions?

Because of the sensitivity of this issue and the possibility of other similar actions affecting the integrity of the statistical system, we ask that GAO report back to us with its preliminary findings by the end of October 2003.

Sincerely,


WM. LACY CLAY
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Technology,
Information Policy, Intergovernmental
Relations and The Census


CAROLYN B. MALONEY
Member of Congress

¹ The attached article that appeared in yesterday's *USA Today* chronicles a few examples of Friday afternoon releases.

USA TODAY
September 22, 2003, Monday
FINAL EDITION

It's TGIF for the White House when it has bad news

by Judy Keen and Haya El Nasser

WASHINGTON -- The Bush administration seems to be following an axiom that guided many of its predecessors: To keep negative headlines to a minimum, release bad news on a Friday.

For at least 15 years, the Census Bureau has released its annual reports on the nation's income and poverty statistics on a Tuesday or a Thursday. This year, when indicators suggest that the reports will document downward trends, they will be released Friday.

Census spokesman Lawrence Neal says the agency "picked a date out of the air." But the Bush administration has a pattern of announcing controversial or unfavorable news as the weekend begins.

To attract little attention, the strategy makes sense. Friday night's network news broadcasts are the least-watched of the workweek. Saturday newspapers are the week's least-read editions.

Robert Lichter, director of STATS or Statistical Assessment Service, a group that monitors the use of numbers by the news media, says Fridays are ideal for "throwing the news into a black hole."

This administration isn't the first to try to bury bad news.

On a Friday in 1996, for example, the Clinton White House released long-sought records from Hillary Rodham Clinton's former law firm, saying the files had just been found. In 1989, the first President Bush lifted trade sanctions against two Chinese companies on a Friday soon after China's crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen S

This Bush administration has had many bad-news Fridays:

- * On a Friday last November, the Environmental Protection Administration said it would relax enforcement of the Clean Air Act so older coal-fired power plants could renovate without having to install anti-pollution equipment
- * On a Friday in January, the administration said it would consider removing Clean Water Act protections from up to one-fifth of the nation's streams, ponds, lakes, mudflats and wetlands.
- * The resignations of Army Secretary Thomas White and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill were announced on Friday
- * Last December, Census officials admitted on a Friday that the 2000 Census undercounted the nation by 3.3 million people.

Politicians on Capitol Hill know about stealth Fridays, too. When Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., announced in December that he would resign as majority leader because of controversy over racial comments he had made, he did it on a Friday.

The week between Christmas and New Year's and the day before national holidays also are popular times to try to slip controversial news under the radar. Last year, the administration said on the eve of Thanksgiving that it

would give managers of national forests more authority to approve logging with less study of potential environmental problems.

Neal says he had planned to release the poverty and income reports Tuesday, but they are more complex this year

"We just moved it to the 26th," he says. Asked if that indicates the numbers will not be very positive, he says: "They weren't positive last year, either," and the numbers were released on a Tuesday.

Last year's reports showed that median household income in 2001 registered the first significant decline since 1991 and the percentage of Americans living in poverty rose from 11.3% to 11.7%, the first increase in five years

The Friday strategy works best if the story is a "one-day wonder," and isn't dramatic enough to dominate Sunday's widely read newspapers and popular TV news talk shows, Lichter says. "You want that one-day wonder to be the day that nobody wonders about the news."